

RISKY BUSINESS: DEMOCRATISING SUCCESS AND THE CASE OF  
FEDERALLY SENTENCED ABORIGINAL WOMEN

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## Abstract

This dissertation arose out of my long term involvement with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan, first as a volunteer and then as a Board member. As a volunteer I began to notice a chronic overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canada's federal justice system both historically and currently, particularly at the higher security levels. As a Board member I also began to notice that Aboriginal women's voices were not being heard in the context within which they were speaking. Rather, the women's voices were taken out of context, and used to their detriment. Aboriginal women were seen to be the sole architects of their misfortunes. Excluded from any consideration were the colonized social spaces in which they found themselves.

Using a critical ethnographical approach, this study aims to understand federally sentenced Aboriginal women's life experiences from their perspective. In doing so, not only is new knowledge created but also the women's choices are understood in the context within which they were made. Through their life experiences, this study investigates how living in marginalised social spaces circumscribes the choices available to these women and ultimately structures their identities. Their stories reflect the pressures brought to bear on their lives, which are bound up in race, gender and class oppression. We can then begin to understand the implications of life at the margins for not only federally sentenced Aboriginal women's identities but also for how they fare in Canada's federal justice system.

Through the voices of the women, this study demonstrated that the societal framework within which Aboriginal women live in Canada does indeed carry assumptions about gender, race and class, and which set these women in marginalised social spaces. The voices of these women also indicated that these oppressive social spaces extended behind the walls of the prison and worked to their detriment. Their time inside of prison, for the most part, did little to widen their constellation of choices. Indeed, their time inside was shown to have the potential of further entrenching their marginalization which has the potential of following these women in perpetuity. Such a situation has grave consequences, not only for the women's future functioning on the outside, but also for the future functioning of the community-at-large.

Their stories, their definitions of risk, their perceptions of public order and incarceration, in their own words (as subjects) then, help us to more fully understand the events and social circumstances that led them to the situations in which they currently find themselves. This has important public policy implications in terms of resource allocation and service delivery for their healing and (re)integration into communities, not back into prisons.

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